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## A WAR OF LETTERS – WHAT DO WE READ IN SOLDIERS’ LETTERS OF RUSSIAN JEWS FROM THE GREAT WAR?

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When the Russian Imperial state-Duma, the nationwide parliament of the Russian empire at the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July 1914 (old style) discussed the declaration of war by emperor Nicholas II, deputy Naftali Markovich Fridman (1863-1921), one of the few Jewish deputies of the fourth duma declared the unconditional approval of the Russian Jews for the Russian war effort:

I have the high honor to express the feeling, which in this historical moment inspires the Jewish people. In the big upheaval, in which all tribes and peoples of Russia take part, the Jews embark too upon the field of battle side by side with all of Russia’s peoples. We Jews lived and live under particular different legal conditions, but in spite of that we have always understood ourselves as citizens of Russia. We have always been faithful sons of our fatherland and no forces could separate us from our homeland Russia, from the lands with which we are affiliated with century-old ties. If we come forward to defend our homeland from a foreign invasion, we do this not only dutiful but out of a feeling of deep sympathy. In the current period of probation while we pay attention to the plea issued from the height of the throne, we, Russian Jews, stand as one man under Russian flags and give all our strengths for the resistance against the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

He renewed this pledge at the duma-session of January, 27<sup>th</sup> 1915 (old style). And, indeed, the Jews of Russia filled the ranks of the Russian Imperial army in impressive numbers. It is not possible to establish the exact number of Jews serving in the Tsar’s army in the First World War but with estimates between

1. «Декларация прочитанная в заседании Государственной Думы 26-го июля 1914 года» in: A. D. Idelson (ed.), *Из недавнего прошлого: речи еврейских депутатов в Государственной думе за годы войны* [The speeches of the Jewish deputies in the state Duma in the war years], Petrograd, Vostok, 1917, p. 3; For a similar declaration of Jewish loyalty see: *Новый восход*, 24<sup>th</sup> of September 1914 (old style).

300.000 and half a million it was probably the highest number of all belligerent nations.<sup>2</sup> To be sure – the vast majority of these soldiers were not volunteers. But Jews from middle class and well-to-do families did not seldom volunteer for the war. Stories of Jewish boys who run away from home to serve at the front were published in the Jewish press. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern underlines, that a disproportionately high number of Jews in the Russian army were decorated with the St. George cross for their bravery even if Jewish soldiers received proportionately half as many awards as non-Jews.<sup>3</sup> However, the patriotic pronouncements at the beginning of the war were proclaimed most loudly among the educated strata of the urban population of which Jews constituted a significant element. Due to the politics of selective integration only soldiers, artisans, students and members of higher estates lived legally in the Russian metropolises of Moscow and St. Petersburg.<sup>4</sup> The social composition of the Jews in these cities therefore did not mirror the social profile of the small places of settlement (*shtetl*) at the western border regions of the empire, where Jews dominated the demographic picture.<sup>5</sup>

One year after the declaration of war deputy Fridman took the floor at the Imperial state-Duma again. In his eyes, Russian Jews had “participated in the war in a noteworthy manner.”<sup>6</sup> He went on saying:

The Jewish youth, which, as a result of the restrictions as to admission to the high schools of the country, had been forced to study abroad, returned home when war was declared, or entered the armies of the allied nations. A

2. Felix Aaron Theilhaber, «Weltkrieg, Der, und die Juden», in: Georg Herlitz and Bruno Kirschner (eds.), *Jüdisches Lexikon. Ein enzyklopädisches Handbuch des jüdischen Wissens in vier Bänden*, Berlin, Jüdischer Verlag, 1927-1930, vol. 4, 2, p. 1379-1381 speaks of 100.000 Jews in the German armed forces and 600.000 to 700.000 Jewish recruits in Russia during the World War I, while Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern «Military Service in Russia», in: *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, vol. 2, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 2008, p. 1170-1174, counts 300.000 Jewish soldiers in Russia during the First World War. *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone*, ed. by The American Jewish Committee, New York, 1916, p. 83 mentions the estimates of 350.000 and 400.000 Jewish soldiers in Russia. Marsha Rozenblit states that over 300.000 Jewish men fought for Austria-Hungary during the First World War. Marsha L. Rozenblit, *Reconstructing a National Identity. The Jews of Habsburg Austria During World War I*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 82. Slightly different, Derek J. Penslar «Jews and the Military. A History», Princeton and Oxford 2013, p. 157 speaks of 3.5 percent Jews (350,000) in Russia's and 4 percent (320,000) in Austria-Hungary's armed forces.

3. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews in the Russian Army, 1827-1917: Drafted into Modernity*, Cambridge – New York, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 260.

4. Benjamin Nathans, *Beyond the Pale. The Jewish Encounter with Late Imperial Russia*, Berkeley, Stanford University Press, 2002; Yvonne Kleinmann, «An zwei Meeren und doch an Land – Eine vergleichende Skizze des soziokulturellen Profils der jüdischen Bevölkerung St. Petersburgs und Odessas im 19. Jahrhundert», in: Victor Herdt (ed.), *Metropolen im russischen Vielvölkerreich. Petersburg und Odessa seit dem 18. Jahrhundert*, Lüneburg, 2004 (Nordost-Archiv N.F.; 12), p. 135-166; Yvonne Kleinmann, *Neue Orte, Neue Menschen. Jüdische Lebensformen in St. Petersburg und Moskau im 19. Jahrhundert*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006.

5. Rachel Ertel, *le Shtetl: la bourgade juive de Pologne*, Paris, Payot, 1982; Gérard Silvain (ed.), *Yiddishland*, Corte Madera, Gingko Press, 1999.

6. Speech of Deputy Friedman in the Duma (August 2, 1915), translated from Petrograd “Rech,” of August 3, 1915, and published in the New York “Times,” September 23, 1915, in *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone...* p. 111-117, p. 111.

large number of Jewish students fell at the defense of Liege and also at other points of the western front. The Zionist youths, when they were confronted with the dilemma of accepting Turkish sovereignty or being compelled to emigrate from Palestine, preferred to go to Alexandria and there to join the English army. The Jews built hospitals, contributed money, and participated in the war in every respect just as did the other citizens. Many Jews received marks of distinction for their conduct at the front.<sup>7</sup>

But this time Fridman continued with a unequivocal political statement in which he distanced himself from the Russian government. He distinguished between the Russian people, including the Russian Jews, and the Russian government whom he held responsible for anti-Jewish measures and agitation as the obsession with spies.<sup>8</sup> When the Russian Imperial army had to retreat from the greater part of Galicia, Congress Poland and Lithuania in spring 1915, the Jewish population partly fled from their homes and partly was forcefully evicted. Jews were attacked by Cossacks as well as by regular Russian soldiers. Historiography has charged members of the Russian General Staff with encouraging a “pogrom-mood.”<sup>9</sup> Fridman together with Alexander F. Kerensky (1881-1970)<sup>10</sup> travelled to Lithuania and examined accusations that Jews in Kuzhi had signaled to the enemy and had helped the Germans only to find it totally unfounded.<sup>11</sup> Fridman bolstered his claim against the judeophobe Russian military leadership with a testimony from a Jewish soldier whose letter he read to the parliament. The author of the letter wrote that he had only returned from America to volunteer for the Russian Imperial army:

I risked my life and if, nevertheless, I came as far as Archangel, it was only because I loved my fatherland more than my life or that American freedom which I was permitted to enjoy. I became a soldier, and lost my left arm almost to the shoulder. I was brought into the governmental district of Courland. Scarcely had I reached Riga when I met at the station my mother and my relatives, who had just arrived there, and who on that same day were compelled to leave their hearth and home at the order of the military authorities. Tell the

7. Ibid., p. 112.

8. Semen Goldin, «“Я сразу опознал в нём жида”: Еврей в документах русской армейской контрразведки и военных судов в годы Первой мировой войны» [Jews in the documents of the Russian military counterintelligence and military courts in the years of the First World War], in: *Jews and Slavs* 19, 2008, p. 132-145.

9. Peter Gatrell, *Russia's First World War. A Social and Economic History*, Harlow, Pearson, 2005, p. 30. See also: Eric Lohr, «1915 and the War Pogrom Paradigm in the Russian Empire», in: Jonathan Dekel-Chen [et al.] (eds.), *Anti-Jewish Violence: Rethinking the Pogrom in East European History*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011, p. 41.

10. Being a member of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR), Kerenski was elected to the state Duma in 1912. He was one of the most outspoken critics of the Tsarist war effort and held Tsar Nicholas II (1868-1918), who had been made Supreme Commander of the Russian forces in September 1915, personally responsible for the ill success at the front. Kerensky in July 1917 became the Prime Minister of the Provisional Government, which was overthrown by the Bolshevik *coup d'état* in November 1917.

11. Dov Levin, *The Litvaks. The Story of the Jews in Lithuania*, Jerusalem, Yad Vashem, 2000, p. 106; «The Kuzhi Case», in *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone...*, p. 48-50; William C. Fuller, *The Foe Within. Fantasies of Treason and the End of Imperial Russia*, Ithaca (NY), Cornell University Press, 2006, p. 177.

gentlemen who sit on the benches of the Right that I do not mourn my lost arm, but I do mourn deeply the self-respect that was not denied to me in alien lands but is now lost to me.<sup>12</sup>

The author of the letter most probably speaks of the banishment of Jews from Courland and the Lithuanian *gouvernement* of Kowno, for which the “Kuzhi Incident” served as a pretext.<sup>13</sup> While General Nikolai Yanushkevich (1868-1918) singled Jews out for especially harsh treatment, the Russian General Staff was responsible for the eviction of Poles, Lithuanians, Jews, Germans and Gypsies from the vicinity of the front under the charge of betrayal.<sup>14</sup> Fridman went on to add other examples of counterproductive measures of the military and civil administration *vis-à-vis* some of its most loyal subjects. He concluded with the comparison of the contemporary situation of the Jews in Russia with that of the Jews in Spain under the reign of King Ferdinand II. of Aragon (1452-1516) and Queen Isabella I. of Castile (1451–1504) who signed the edict of expulsion of the Jews from Spain in 1492.<sup>15</sup> Fridman ended his speech with almost prophetic words, expressing a long cherished hope of Russian Jewry:

We [...] hope that the time is not distant when we can be citizens of the Russian state with full equality of privileges with the free Russian people. Before the face of the entire country, before the entire civilized world, I declare that the calumnies against the Jews are the most repulsive lies and chimeras of persons who will have to be responsible for their crimes.<sup>16</sup>

When the Russian Provisional Government on 22<sup>nd</sup> of March 1917 declared all restrictions based on class, religion, estate or inheritance null and void, the Jewish equality was achieved.<sup>17</sup> However, what should be noted here is the use Fridman made of the letter of an unnamed Jewish soldier. The short quotation supplied him with a testimony from somebody who had seen war with his own eyes, somebody who had served at the forward most point. His letter fulfilled a function similar to the publication of the correspondence of other Jewish soldiers during war time, who were printed in large numbers in the Russian Jewish

12. Speech of Deputy Friedman in the Duma (August 2, 1915) in: *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone...*, p. 112.

13. Frank M. Schuster, *Zwischen allen Fronten. Osteuropäische Juden während des Ersten Weltkrieges (1914-1919)*, Köln – Weimar – Wien, Böhlau, 2004, p. 203-209.

14. Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History...*, p. 30-31, p. 181-183.

15. This Iberian paradigm was – it seems a – common figure of thought among critical intellectuals in Russia. Olga Litvak, *Conscription and the Search for Modern Russian Jewry*, Bloomington – Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 2006, p. 187-198.

16. Speech of Deputy Fridman in the Duma (August 2, 1915) in: *The Jews in the Eastern War Zone...*, p. 116-117.

17. «Постановление Временного правительства об отмене вероисповедных и национальных ограничений» [Decree of the Provisional Government on the abolition of the restrictions for ethnic or religious causes], in: *Книга о русском еврействе от 1860-х годов до революции 1917 г.*, New York, Sojuz russkikh evreev, 1960 [reprint: Jerusalem – Moscow, Gescharim, 2002], p. 143-145. Peter Gatrell notes that measures against the German colonists were not taken back by the Provisional Government. Gatrell, *Russia's First World War: A Social and Economic History...*, p. 183.

press.<sup>18</sup> The fact that these texts could claim, that most likely they were written in the trenches, legitimized their publication in a particular way. Besides their function, the same main narrative elements are here: The young Jewish soldier, sometimes a volunteer, is ready to sacrifice his life for the fatherland. This patriotic zeal is loaded with a particular Jewish motive. If Jewish bravery could be shown to other soldiers and more important, to a Russian public, this would serve the cause of the emancipation of all Jews in Russia. When the soldier is aware of the miserable plight of the Jewish refugees from the War zone in the area of Jewish settlement (*cherta osedlosti*)<sup>19</sup>, he is shocked and terrified from what he has to witness. Even if he is a very brave soldier he now has to struggle hard not to be overwhelmed by his painful doubts or to lose his self-respect – as in the letter quoted by deputy Fridman. Depending on the intention of the author and the tendency of the story, there are two possible outcomes of the story, a positive as well a negative one. The hero is either overcome by his doubts and embraces nihilism which in turn let him risk his life and leads him into death on the battlefield or he channels the energy of the shock into a renewal of his morale by which he can continue fighting. One example for the rather dark outcome is the *Story of a Jewish Soldier*, written and published by Simon Dubnov, one of the outstanding historians of Russian and World Jewry. The story was composed during wartime and Dubnov himself as well as later editors made no secret of the fact that there were several stories of Jewish soldiers who served as biographical role models for this story. The narrative figure of the poor Jewish soldier who by the sight of his own relatives being deported to the interior of Russia or being killed in a war time pogrom, loses his mind and eventually his life, was found in many war novels in Jewish periodicals.<sup>20</sup> That the tone has changed significantly in early Soviet publications can be seen among others in the novels of Isaac Babel (1894-1940) from the Civil War.<sup>21</sup> A much lesser known example is the autobiographical story of a Jewish army surgeon *In the grey coat. Notes from the years 1914-1918*.<sup>22</sup> The principal conflict in the army is no longer between Jews and (Russian) anti-Semites and suicide is no longer considered an option. But the principal paradox

18. Examples are the illustrated journals *Евреи на войне* [Jews in the war], *Война и евреи* [The War and the Jews] as well as *Русский Еврей* [The Russian Jew], edited by D. Kumanov, Russian weeklies, who were published from fall 1914 to spring 1915 in Moscow. They served as organs for the advertisement of the Jewish war effort in Russia. “Thick journals” like *Еврейская старина* [Jewish antiquities], where Simon Dubnov (1860-1941) worked as editor, published also letters of Jewish soldiers, especially after the (military) censorship had been abolished in spring 1917. Simon Dubnov (ed.), «Из “Чёрной книги” российского еврейства: Материалы для истории войны 1914-1915 гг.» [From the Black Book of Russian Jewry. Material from the War 1914-1918], in *Еврейская старина* 10, 1918, p. 195-298.

19. Russian for “zone of settlement.”

20. One example is: «В родном углу» [In the native region], in: *Евреи на войне...*, 1-2, 1915, p. 13.

21. Isaac Babel, *Red Cavalry*, New York, Routledge, 2003; Isaac Babel, *Œuvres complètes*, Paris, Le Bruit du temps, 2011.

22. Leon I. Ostrover, *В серой шинели* [In the grey coat], Kiev, 1925, p. 102, p. 1105-1106, p. 1114.

of Dubnov's story lies elsewhere. He states in the subtitle of his *The story of a Jewish soldier* that it should be read as a *Confession of one of many*.<sup>23</sup> What Dubnov described, however, was only a part of the reality of the Jewish war experience in the Russian army. At least from the historical distance of one hundred years after the beginning of World War I, the historian has to take caution if he wants to establish some insight into the Jewish war experience. At first, it has to be asked if there were other and contradicting stories of Jewish soldiers as well. And in the same number of the weekly «Evreyskaya nedelya» [Jewish week] where the second part of Dubnov's *History of a Jewish Soldier* was published, we read about Saul Moiseevich Frumkin, who was already decorated in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905, that he had received the order of St. Anna in 1915 for his service as an army surgeon.<sup>24</sup>

To integrate the narration as well as the function of letters written by Jewish soldiers in Russia during the time of the First World War we must bear in mind two broader contexts – a Jewish and a non-Jewish one. Therefore, we have to take a step backwards and look at the general as well as the Jewish war experience. It is hard to find a consensus of what the First World War meant to the European societies which had been affected. This holds the more so for a transnational, ethno-religious group who was as socially diverse and in a culturally complex state of selective integration into European societies of the time.<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, it does not make the picture less complex to shift the focus of our attention to particular areas of Eastern and Southeastern Europe or the Levant and Palestine where a significant proportion of the population at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was of Jewish origin.<sup>26</sup> However, from the moment it broke out, among most of the contemporaries it was an undisputed notion that *la Grande Guerre* was an epoch-making event that would transform Europe's societies in unexpected and probably disastrous ways. The war and its consequences for sure resulted in a tremendous change of the social and cultural

23. Simon Dubnov, *История еврейского солдата (исповедь одного из многих)* [History of a Jewish soldier – Confession of one of many], Petrograd, 1918; «Historia shel ish zava Yehudi» [History of a Jewish Soldier (Hebrew)], in: *Ha-Tequfa* 1, 1918, p. 607-630; Simon Dubnov, *Histoire d'un soldat juif. Récit historique*, Paris, 1929; Simon Dubnov, *Histoire d'un soldat juif*, transl. from the Russian by Laurence Dyevre and Alexandre Eidelman, Paris, Cerf, 1988.

24. Simon Dubnow, *Geschichte eines jüdischen Soldaten. Bekenntnis eines von vielen*, transl. from the Russian by Vera Bischitzky, ed. by Stefan Schreiner, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012, p. 7-29, 21. *Еврейская неделя* 14-15, April 3rd, 1916.

25. Jonathan Frankel, «The Paradoxical Politics of Marginality: Thoughts on the Jewish Situation in the Years 1914-1921», in: *Studies in Contemporary Jewry*, An Annual 4, 1988, p. 3-21. The Jewish war experience in Austria, Germany, Great Britain and the U.S. is analyzed in: Sarah Panter, *Jüdische Erfahrungen und Loyalitätskonflikte im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014.

26. Jay Winter «The Palestine Campaign within the Great War» in: Glenda Abramson and Eran Dolev (eds.), *Palestine and World War I. Grand Strategy, Military Tactics and Culture in War*, London, I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 1-19; Eugene Rogan, «World War I and the Fall of the Ottomans: Consequences for South East Europe», in: Othon Anastasakis [et al.] (ed.), *Balkan Legacies of the Great War. The Past is Never Dead*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 59-65.



fabric of Europe, including particularly its Jewish populations.<sup>27</sup> The shock waves of *the Great War* were felt in world regions far from each other as Russia, the Middle East and Northern Africa, which were heavily connected to Europe and sometimes dependent from it. Either parts of these regions became theaters of war itself, or they functioned as economic and strategic hinterland of the belligerent powers.<sup>28</sup> Was there then in all this diversity a particular Jewish experience of the First World War at least in Eastern Europe? In the perspective of history as well as of memory, the contrast between the active role Jewish soldiers played as combatants and the passive role of the Jewish civil populations who suffered from the war has loomed large almost since the first gunshots were fired in the summer of 1914. Already contemporaries saw the war as a time of truth who put the loyalty of the Jewish populations in general and the military value of Jewish men in particular on the test. Sarah Panter in her study of four different Jewish communities in war times clearly shows that questions of Jewish loyalty gained momentum. Loyalty in war times was a complex matter, which was connected with several layers of identity as (ethnic or religious) Jew, as man, as citizen and as soldier. One could add the question of congregational solidarity with orthodox, liberal or conservative denominations of Judaism as well as political sympathies with socialism, Zionism or general political movements of the respective countries. It must be underlined that judeophobic as well as Philo-Semitic segments of the different non-Jewish public spheres shared the assumption of the war as a test case for loyalties, even if looking to it from different angles. Parts of the educated elite in Russia for instance, voiced the idea that even the *ancien regime* of the tsars had to acknowledge the fighting spirit and the patriotism of its Jewish subjects. As a result, at least in this perspective, the effort of Jewish soldiers then would naturally result in the emancipation of all the Jews of the empire.<sup>29</sup> That, after the

27. Ezra Mendelsohn, «Zwischen großen Erwartungen und bösem Erwachen: Das Ende der multinationalen Reiche in Ostmittel- und Südosteuropa aus jüdischer Perspektive», in: Dittmar Dahlmann and Anke Hilbrenner (eds.), *Zwischen großen Erwartungen und bösem Erwachen. Juden, Politik und Antisemitismus in Ost- und Südosteuropa 1918-1945*, Paderborn, Schöningh, 2007, p. 13-31.

28. The Ottoman Empire joined the war on the 29th of October 1914 on the side of the Central Powers. The Allied attempt to land in Gallipoli and march to Istanbul, added a rather small battle field to the existing ones in Europe. Nevertheless, the battles in Transcaucasia and the Middle East strengthened the colonial dimension of the war. The already all-encompassing European World War turned into a global battle in the truest sense of the word. The consequences of the war and the ensuing peace treaties shaped the face of the Middle East for generations to come. David Fromkin, *A Peace to End All Peace. Creating the Modern Middle East 1914-1922*, London, A. Deutsch, 1989; Ulrich Trumpener, «The Turkish War», in: John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War I*, Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 97-111; Hamit Bozarslan, «The Ottoman Empire», in *A Companion to World War I...*, p. 494-507; Mustafa Aksakal «The Ottoman Empire», in: Robert Gerwarth and Erez Manela (eds.), *Empires at War 1911-1923*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 17-33; Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty «An Imperial Turn in First World War Studies», in: Andrew Tait Jarboe and Richard S. Fogarty (eds.), *Empires in World War I. Shifting Frontiers and Imperial Dynamics in a Global Conflict*, London – New York, I. B. Tauris, 2014, p. 1-20.

29. J. F. Roditschew «Bolschewismus und Juden», in: J. F. Roditschew and Alfred Nossig, *Bolschewismus und Juden*, Wien – Berlin – New York, Interterritorialer Verlag Renaissance, 1922, p. 1-19, p. 19 claims that “the renewed Russia will be a shelter of equal rights or it will not be.”



war Jews would only be treated as equals before the law and in the Russian public, seemed all too obvious for anybody who understood the democratizing effects of modern military fighting.<sup>30</sup> By applying this logic, Jews contributed to their own emancipation when fighting for mother Russia with bravery and courage. On the other hand the common doubts among the highest echelon of the Russian military command concerning the military performance of Jewish soldiers was mirrored in the questioning of the loyalty of the Jewish population living in the regions close to the theater of war. Both insinuations draw a connection between the allegedly insufficient loyalty of the Jewish subjects and the poor war effort of the Russian forces, which after initial fortunes of war had to retreat from Eastern Prussia, Congress Poland, Galicia and greater parts of Lithuania in 1915. However, the First World War not only befall the Jewish population of the Russian empire. The Jews of the Habsburg monarchy as well as the Jewries in South-Eastern Europe and Ottoman Palestine were affected as well. However if this geographical widening of the perspective is not enough. My main argument here is, that the biographical narration of the soldier as a young men catches only parts of the picture. Stories of men, who commanded over a considerable experience as active combatants and had at least some knowledge of military operations, obviously could attract more attention. The significant experience of the majority of the Jewish civilian population, which probably had a quite ambivalent position vis-a-vis the various military units who occupied their respective places of settlement, did not found a similar vivid expression in print.<sup>31</sup> The range of Jewish war experiences would not be complete without the figure of the Prisoner-of-War<sup>32</sup>, the deserter<sup>33</sup>, the refugee and the

30. It has been argued that the mobilization of the Russian population concerned particularly the lower layer of the social spectrum of Russian society, be it in its Jewish or non-Jewish part. Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern, *Jews in the Russian Army, 1827-1917. Drafted into Modernity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, p. 253. Positive evaluations of the Jewish war effort in Russia by Tsarist officials as noted in Western public: Marc Saperstein, «Western Jewish perceptions of Russian Jews at the beginning of the First World War», in *European Judaism* 43, 2010, no. 1, p. 116-127, p. 121.

31. Having said that, I do not claim that it found no expression at all – and be it in the form of paternalistic patronization vis-à-vis the Eastern Jews (“Ostjuden”) by Jewish soldiers in the German army. I wanted to underline that the First-Person-Narrative was not very useful for a story of (passive) suffering. The great chronicler of the suffering of Galician Jewry in the First World War was Shloyme Zaynvl Rapoport (1863-1920), also known under the name of Semen Akimovich An-ski. S. An-Ski «Der yidishe Khurbn fun Poyln, Galitsye un Bukovine (fun tog-bikh 1914-1917) [The destruction of Jewish Poland, Galicia and Bukowina (from the diary 1914-1917)], Vilno [Vilnius], Warsaw – New York, Ferl. An-Ski, 1922-1924 (*Gezamlte Shriftn*; vol. 4-6); S. An-Ski, *The Enemy at His Pleasure: A Journey Through the Jewish Pale of Settlement During World War I*, ed. and transl. by Joachim Neugroschel, New York, Metropolitan Books, 2003. Olaf Terpitz (University of Vienna) is preparing a critical edition of this classical account of Jewish war experience. [dk-galizien.univie.ac.at/postdoktorandinnen/](http://dk-galizien.univie.ac.at/postdoktorandinnen/) and [static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/fsp-kde/Ank%C3%BCndigungen\\_und\\_Einladungen/2016-05-23\\_Jewish\\_Soldiers\\_Programme.pdf](http://static.uni-graz.at/fileadmin/fsp-kde/Ank%C3%BCndigungen_und_Einladungen/2016-05-23_Jewish_Soldiers_Programme.pdf) (01. 05. 2016)

32. B. I. Grinshtein, «В германском плену (1914-1920 гг.)» [In German captivity (1914-1920)], in: *Вопросы истории* 48, 9, 1975, p. 115-126.

33. A. Dneprovski, *Записки дезертира: война 1914-1918 гг.* [Notes of a deserter: The War 1914-1918], New York, Albatros, 1931. Not with a single word Dneprovski mentions a possible Jewish heritage or a particular Jewish motive neither of his desertion nor of his writing. Viktor Kelner nevertheless counts his account among the few Russian texts of Jewish war experience. Viktor Kelner «Фронтные письма (из писем еврея – солдата Первой мировой войны)», in *Архив еврейской истории* 6, 2011, p. 201-235. [publications.hse.ru/books/60298799](http://publications.hse.ru/books/60298799)

volunteer.<sup>34</sup> Since Jewish army surgeons and field Rabbis have written on their respective war experiences one should not forget these and other professional role-models in times of war.<sup>35</sup> That active role models often were privileged over other texts is a clear expression of the significance of the meaning of a Jewish war experience for the post-war-writing of Jewish history and the use of history in the Jewish and Israeli nation building. The Jewish war experience of 1914-1918 as well as post-war-violence, which saw pogroms on a massive scale and new anti-Jewish allegations, fitted well into a general story of Jewish suffering as well as Jewish heroism in the face of total destruction. This perspective was strengthened by the Nazi-instigated murder of the Jewish population and the annihilation of Jewish culture of Eastern Europe in the Second World War. In this interpretation, the experiences of World War One, particularly as it was fought in Eastern Europe, where a majority of Jews lived at that time, served as a blue-print for what was yet to come in World War Two.<sup>36</sup> Still, we have to distinguish between the historical prospects of 1918, when Simon Dubnow already spoke of a thirty or thirty-five years war against the Jews on one hand and a post-Holocaust-perspective on the other.<sup>37</sup>

It has already been said that active roles have been privileged over passive roles in the memory of the Jewish War experience. Yochanan Petrovsky-Shtern in his study about Jews in the Imperial Russian army, likewise suggests three biographical representations of Jewish soldiers. In an ideal-typically manner he mentions the militant Bolshevik, represented by Moisei Izrailevich Gubelman, the practical Zionist, represented by Joseph Vladimirovich [Volfovich] Trumpeldor and the new Humanist, represented by Henryk Goldszmit.<sup>38</sup> Alas, only one of the three was wearing the Russian uniform during 1914-1918. Nevertheless, their example is very useful to draw attention to the complex social reality of Jewish military service in the ranks of the Tsarist army. Moisei I. Gubelman (1883/1884-1968) was born as one of nine siblings in a poor Jewish family in the city of Chita, an important train junction on the Trans-Siberian Railway.

34. For Jewish students see: Trude Maurer, «Fern der Front und fern vom „Volk“: Die „Verteidigung der Heimat“ durch Studenten und Professoren des Russischen Reiches», in: Stefan Karner and Philipp Lesiak (eds.), *Erster Weltkrieg. Globaler Konflikt – lokale Folgen (Neue Perspektiven)*, Innsbruck – Wien – Bozen, Studien Verlag, 2014, p. 247-270, here 254-256.

35. Peter C. Appelbaum, *Loyalty Betrayed: Jewish Chaplains in the German Army During First World War*, London, Vallentine Mitchell, 2014. A significant part of the Jewish memories concerning the service in the Russian forces in World War I were written by army surgeons and medical doctors. One of the most prominent examples is Shaul Tchernichowsky's account (1875-1943). Glenda Abramson «Shaul Tchernichowsky. The Poeta Magus», in: Id., *Hebrew Literature of the First World War*, London – Portland (Or.), Valentine Mitchell, 2008, p. 111-143.

36. As a text of a contemporary observer: Jacob Lestschinski, «The Anti-Jewish Program: Tsarist Russia, The Third Reich, and Independent Poland», in: *Jewish Social Studies* 3, 1941, p. 141-158. Jay Winter «The Great War and Jewish Memory», in: *European Judaism* 48, 1, 2015, p. 3-22.

37. Dubnow, *Geschichte eines jüdischen Soldaten. Bekenntnis eines von vielen...*, p. 12-15.

38. Petrovsky-Shtern, *Евреи в русской армии 1827-1914*, Moscow, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2003, p. 419-420.

His father had refused military service and was deported from Ukraine to Siberia. His brother, Yemelyan Mikhailovich Yaroslavsky (born in 1878 as Itzko-Meyer or Minei Izrailevich Gubelman), later became a notorious Stalinist and the author of the official history of the communist party, was well known for his fierce fight against religion in the Russian Revolution.<sup>39</sup> Moisei Gubelman took part at the revolutionary events of 1905 in Chita and served as a soldier in the 18<sup>th</sup> Siberian rifle regiment. He clandestinely organized political resistance against the *ancien regime* and was convicted for eight years of compulsory labor. In the Civil War he fought against Japanese forces and anti-Bolshevik “Whites” in the Far East. He was a member of the government of the short lived Far East Republic (1920-1922), a kind of a buffer state, which was established between Bolshevik Russia and Japan. Gubelman later became a high official in the Federation of Soviet Trade Unions. Gubelman is an example for the small group of Jewish Bolsheviks, which gained their command of military knowledge already before the First World War.

Joseph Trumpeldor (1880-1920) was born in Pyatigorsk (Northern Caucasia) in the family of a Jewish soldier. His father had been allowed to settle outside the area of Jewish settlement as a reward for his service in the Tsar’s army. Trumpeldor volunteered for the Russian army in 1902 and lost his left arm at the siege of Port Arthur during the Russo-Japanese war (1904-1905). After return from Japanese captivity, he received four decorations for bravery including the Cross of St. George, which made him one of the most highly decorated Jewish soldiers in Russia at that time. He was also among the first Jews to receive an officer’s commission as a captain. Trumpeldor had been living in Ottoman Palestine since 1911 when World War I broke out. He went to Egypt, where he together with Vladimir Jabotinsky (1880-1940) fought in the Jewish Legion. This was one of the three Jewish units of the British army.<sup>40</sup> After the February Revolution of 1917 he returned to Russia to organize Jewish self-defense-groups in Petrograd and a Jewish regiment with which he wanted to go to war against the Ottoman forces in the Caucasus.<sup>41</sup> Trumpeldor presided the foundation of the veteran’s organization of Jewish soldiers of the First World War, which took place in Kiev in October 1917. After his return to Palestine

39. Although he was ousted from the inner circle around Stalin during the period of the “Great Purges,” Yaroslavsky died a non-violent dead in 1943. Sandra Dahlke, «Die zwei Leben des Emel’jan Jaroslavskij (1878-1943) und die grenzenlose Liebe zu Stalin», in: Karsten Brüggemann [et al.] (ed.), *Kollektivität und Individualität. Der Mensch im östlichen Europa – Festschrift für Norbert Angermann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Hamburg, Kovač, 2001, p. 323-340, p. 331-332; Sandra Dahlke, *Individuum und Herrschaft im Stalinismus. Emel’jan Jaroslavskij (1878-1943)*, München, Oldenbourg, 2010, p. 35-44.

40. Vladimir Jabotinsky, *Слово о полку: История еврейского легиона по воспоминаниям его инициатора* [A Hero’s Poem. The Story of the Jewish Legion According to the Memories of their Founder], Riga, Renaissance, 1922, Paris, Rassviet, 1928; Michael and Shlomit Keren *We are Coming Unafraid. The Jewish Legions and the Promised Land in the First World War*, Lanham (Md.), Rowman & Littlefield, 2010.

41. Michail Beizer, *Евреи Ленинграда 1917-1939: национальная жизнь и советизация* [The Jews of Leningrad 1917-1939. National Life und Sovietization], Moscow – Jerusalem, Gesharim, 1999, p. 48.

Trumpeldor fell in the defense of Tel Hai, where a monument was erected to honor his achievements. It serves until today to remember the fighting spirit of this Russian Jewish soldier who became an Israeli national hero.

Henryk Goldszmit, better known by his pen-name Janusz Korczak (1878/79-1942), had studied medicine at the University of Warsaw from 1898 to 1904 and became a pediatrician. During the Russo-Japanese War he served as an army doctor in a hospital train between Harbin and Mukden. After short stays in Berlin, Paris and London he continued his work as the director of an Warsaw orphanage for Jewish children. In 1914 Korczak was called up again as a divisional surgeon with the rank of Lieutenant. He had to oversee the work in a field hospital at the Ukrainian front. In Kiev, where he was responsible for an orphanage, he wrote his bestseller *How to love a child*.<sup>42</sup> He served in the Polish Army with the rank of Major during the Polish-Soviet War. Together with the children of his Warsaw orphanage he was deported to the Treblinka death camp where they were killed in August 1942.

If we speak about war letters we have to be aware that during the First World War a great number of these texts were written. It has been said that never before soldiers have produced such a quantity of letters and postcards.<sup>43</sup> To take that fact to heart means to differentiate between the “soldier’s experience of war” as a historical reality that might have been and the communication of some parts of this experience which left its imprint in the letters which we are able to read until today. Questions of censorship and transmission of the soldier’s letters set aside, I suggest to follow Jay Winter, who states, that we have “to explore the construction, adaption, and circulation of these codes [of cultural memory] which frequently take the form of texts about significant historical events, initially produced by those directly engaged in them, but codified in an archive of words, sounds, and images accessible to later generations.”<sup>44</sup> War letters from Jewish soldiers from the Russian empire – according to my understanding – should no longer be read as accounts of strictly individual experiences of war, violence and honor, who were composed without any influence from outside the self who is speaking. Those war letters are rather a source of a communication between their authors and an imagined public who is influenced as well by collective cultural regards. To me it seems obvious that the letters of Jewish soldiers were influenced by the general mood among the Russian educated public as well as by a particular Jewish perspective on the war. Jewish newspapers and periodicals in the countries of the Entente as well as in Germany and Austria-Hungary were very eager to print firsthand accounts of the war experience of the

42. Janusz Korczak, *Jak kochać dziecko. Dziecko w rodzinie* [How to Love a Child. The Child in the Family], Warszawa and Cracow, Towarzystwo Wydawnicze w Warszawie, 1919.

43. Jay Winter, «Cultural Memory and the „Soldiers’ Tale” of the Great War», in: Jay Winter, *Remembering War. The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century*, New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 103-117, 103.

44. Id., «Cultural Memory and the „Soldiers’ Tale” of the Great War»..., p. 104.

Jews in Russia. Letters of soldiers as well as war correspondents, sermons and resolutions of political protagonists were related to by Jews in the West.<sup>45</sup>

The narrative of Jewish soldiers might still provide us with new insights into the war experience of Russia or at least its Jewish population. While it is well worth to read more of the published examples of this newly discovered genre, I will confine myself here with the letters of Samuil Efimovich Sistrin (1880-1914).<sup>46</sup> Samuil Efimovich Sistrin was born in Vitebsk and between 1907 and 1912 studied Law at the Moscow University, finishing his studies with a respective diploma.<sup>47</sup> He worked for the Petersburg section of the “Society for Handicraft and Agricultural Work among the Jews of Russia” (ORT)<sup>48</sup> and it seems as if he identified with the enlightened aim of making the common Jew in Russia more productive. From all what we know, he was a non-religious and acculturated Jew who cherished patriotic sentiments towards Russia. Out of a feeling of civic duty he volunteered for war service in August 1914. He regularly wrote to his fiancée Bella Mayzel and his brother Zalman. The letters to Bella are preserved in the manuscript department of the National Library of Russia in St. Petersburg among the personal papers of S. L. Kameneckii (F. 332, D. Nr. 72). Samuil Sistrin from the 15<sup>th</sup> of August until the 30<sup>th</sup> of November 1914 could write 28 more or less detailed letters to Bella, before he was killed at the 10<sup>th</sup> of December in Eastern Prussia.<sup>49</sup> Sistrin’s letters are noteworthy for the following causes. He gives voice to a disconcertment *vis-à-vis* the Jewish population of the Jewish pale of settlement.<sup>50</sup> We do not read here of the romantic and sometimes patronizing war experience of some among the German Jewish soldiers who idealized the rediscovered authenticity of the “Ostjuden” in Poland. The Jewish self of Sistrin’s letters is not happy about the backwardness of the Jewish families in whose houses he and his comrades live temporarily. Anti-Semitic occurrences in the army which were not concealed do not alter this position. To the opposite: under the strain of the suspicion to have a bias towards his fellow Jews Sistrin is telling about his peculiar rigorous behavior towards Polish and Lithuanian Jews, even if they acknowledge him as a Jew. Non-Jewish Poles were depicted as Anti-Semites or at least unimmunized

45. Marc Saperstein, «Western Jewish perceptions of Russian Jews at the beginning of the First World War», in *European Judaism*, 43, 2010, no. 1, p. 116-127.

46. Kelner, «Фронтовые письма (из писем еврея – солдата Первой мировой войны)»...

47. *Ibid.*, p. 202.

48. Obshchestvo Remeslennago i Zemledelecheskago Truda Sredi Evreev v Rossii; Cf. Shaul Stampfer «ORT», in: Gershon David Hundert (ed.), *The YIVO Encyclopedia of Jews in Eastern Europe*, New Haven – London, Yale University Press, 2008, vol. 2, p. 1291-1292.  
yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/ORT (09. 06. 2016)

49. An obituary was published in *Рассвет* [Dawn], 1915, no. 1, p. 29-30.

50. For the complicated and changing relation between center and periphery in Russian Jewish history of those times: Anke Hilbrenner «Center and Periphery in Russian Jewish Culture During the Crisis of 1914-22», in: Murray Frame, Boris Kolonitskii, Steven G. Marks and Melissa Stockdale (eds.), *Russian Culture in War and Revolution, 1914-22*, vol. 1, *Popular Culture, the Arts, and Institutions*, Bloomington (Indiana), Slavica publishers, 2014, p. 189-207.



against anti-Jewish sentiment. However, Sistrin always tries to do justice to people who under the condition of war might act differently. Germans, who are mentioned not in their role as soldiers or enemies but rather as “kulturtrager” [bearer of civilization] and German refugees are described with empathy. Sistrin states that he came into contact with German individuals as a translator and as advocate of their requests. He underlines that he did everything in his power to help them. While approaching the theatre of war from the time of the departure from home to the real encounter with the enemy at the front line, Sistrin in most of his letters assures Bella that he is not nervous. Reading this repeated assurances one cannot avoid the impression that he is indeed waiting for the real sensation to come. On the other hand the writing itself might have calmed him down. The phrase “I am sober” sounds as if it is more than solely an assertion for the friend at home. The communication links Sistrin and his fiancée in various directions. When she is publishing a patriotic poem, dedicated to him, in a newspaper he is sending her his heartfelt feelings after reading it.<sup>51</sup> He is not only instructing her to give his parents and his brother greetings, but wants to know if the respective letters or postcards have come through. Communication in this correspondence follows not the pattern of a one-way-communication but that of a multipolar web. The fact that the letters of the soldier Sistrin, had already been prepared for publication in a Russian-Jewish journal without the answers of his fiancée of course contradict this impression. To me it is quite right to read the letters of the soldier Samuil Sistrin as an example of one of many. But not as it is suggested in the subtitle of the story of Simon Dubnow’s Jewish soldier. To the contrary the history of the functionalization of these and many other letters which appeared in all the different periodicals of Jewish and non-Jewish provenance during the years of the First World War on all sides of the frontlines corroborates the argument, that these letters were taken as another example of Jewish suffering so richly documented through the ages. In this respect they are documents not of individual experiences but of a collective imagination.<sup>52</sup>

51. The poem, which was published 1914 in no. 47 of the Russian-Jewish organ “Razsvet” is full of patriotic sentiment towards Russia and the just cause of its war effort. Poland and Belgium as well as the Jewish people are depicted as the main victims of the war.

52. For other examples of Jewish war letters from World war One: R. Bernstein, «Russische und Jüdische Feldpost» [Russian and Jewish Field Post], in: *Der Jude. Eine Monatsschrift* [The Jew. A Monthly], 1916, no. 1, p. 47-51, [sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/id/3101348](http://sammlungen.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/cm/id/3101348); *Jüdisches Archiv. Mitteilungen des Komitees Jüdisches Kriegsarchiv*, Wien, Löwit, January 1915-September 1917. Eleonore Lappin «Zwischen den Fronten: Das Wiener Jüdische Archiv – Mitteilungen des Komitees Jüdisches Kriegsarchiv 1915–1917», in: Eleonore Lappin, Michael Nagel (eds.), *Deutsch-jüdische Presse und jüdische Geschichte. Dokumente, Darstellungen, Wechselbeziehungen = The German-Jewish press and Jewish history: documents, representations, interrelations*, Bremen, Lumière, 2008, vol. 1, p. 229-246. Bernd Ulrich, Benjamin Ziemann (eds.), *German Soldiers Letters in the Great War: Letters and Eyewitness Accounts*, translated by Christiane Brocks, Barnsley, Pen & Sword Military, 2010.